Southern Sun

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Southern Sun

by catie_writes_things

Summary

Instead of being sent to look for the Avatar, Zuko is banished with a different task: he must govern the Southern Water Tribe, and may only return home when he has won the unquestioned loyalty of a southern waterbender.

But the last southern waterbender was killed three years ago.

Or so Ozai thinks.

Chapter 1: The First Two Weeks

Prologue: The First Two Weeks

They came in the early summer, two months after her father and the other warriors left.

There was no black snow this time, for the boat they came in was not large enough to spew that much soot into the air. It wasn't even a warship, as they would later realize, though that hadn't stopped Sokka from doing his best to muster what little defenses he could - if a half-finished snow wall and a thirteen-year-old with a club could even be counted as defenses. The stout old man in half-armor who disembarked first certainly didn't seem to think so.

Unfazed by Sokka's war cry - which even Katara knew would have been more impressive had his voice not cracked in the middle of it - the old man easily caught the club with one hand when Sokka swung it at him. His grip was firm enough that Sokka could not break it, but he made no counter attack of his own. "Please, young man," he said in a tired voice, looking down at Sokka with pity. "Let's not make this harder than it has to be."

Sokka, to his credit, let go of the club and drew his knife. It was a knife meant more for cleaning fish than fighting, but it could be deadly enough. Yet the old man swatted aside that attack as well, and the knife went flying into the snow. When Sokka resorted to punches and kicks, they proved just as ineffective.

At last, the old man caught both of Sokka's wrists. "Please," he repeated. "You have shown your courage, young warrior. Now stand down, and no one will be hurt."

"Liar!" Sokka shouted, struggling helplessly against the old man's grip. "You're here to kill us!"

"No," the old man replied, shaking his head. "We have not been sent to destroy your tribe, but to govern it."

Behind the half-finished wall where Katara was crouched, watching, there were gasps and murmurs from the other women who clutched fish-knives of their own with shaking hands. They were less trained even than Sokka, but just as prepared to fight desperately if it came to that. They had never imagined the Fire Lord, half a world away, would ever consider their village worth governing.

"Never!" Sokka shouted defiantly. "You are not our chief!" Katara felt a surge of pride for her brother, and a pang of anger at her father for not being here to defend his own position, as well as the whole tribe, from this foreign invader.

"You misunderstand," the old man replied, as maddeningly calm as ever. "It is not I who has been appointed. It is Prince Zuko." Then he dropped one of Sokka's wrists, stepped to the side, and pointed behind him, to the top of the gangplank of the boat, at someone that no one had taken notice of until now.

He was a boy about Sokka's age, in full Fire Nation armor and a red cloak that almost looked too big for him. Half his face was covered with bandages, and he was scowling at them. Katara thought he was the most pathetic looking person she had ever seen, and she hated him.

Then, Prince Zuko spoke.

"Your chief Hakoda and his men attacked a Fire Nation convoy in our waters," he began, sounding like he was reciting a prepared speech. He began to walk slowly down the gangplank. "They fought...with honor," he went on, the last word said with some difficulty through gritted teeth. His water tribe audience waited with bated breath as he paused in the middle of the gangplank, swallowed, then continued. "The survivors were presented to the Fire Lord, among them Chief Hakoda, who surrendered this." He reached behind his back, removed something from his belt, and held it up for all to see.

Katara gasped this time along with the others. In Prince Zuko's hand was an elaborately carved whalebone knife. It was her father's knife. The knife of the chief.

"The Fire Lord has given it to me," Prince Zuko concluded unnecessarily as he reached the bottom of the gangplank and set foot on the icy surface of the south pole for the first time. "I am in charge here now." He lifted his chin, daring anyone to challenge him, knowing that no one could. The knife had come to him fairly, by their own rules of war.

Katara hated him even more.

“That could have gone better,” Zuko commented to his uncle when they were back aboard their ship, less than an hour after he had delivered the speech his father had written for him . That was all the time it had taken for the women and children that constituted what was left of the Southern Water Tribe to acknowledge his authority, and for him to survey his new dominion - a collection of tents, a few canoes, and barren antarctic wasteland as far as the eye could see in every direction. He and Uncle Iroh would have to continue living aboard ship until some more suitable dwelling could be constructed.

“But it also could have gone much worse,” Iroh replied, ever the optimist. “They did accept you, after all.”

“They didn’t have much choice,” Zuko scoffed, removing his cloak and throwing it on his bunk in the narrow hold. “One boy wasn’t going to stop us, even if it weren’t for their primitive superstition about this thing.” He brandished the crude knife that now represented the last shred of dignity he possessed. It wasn’t even sharp, and would be useless in a fight. If losing it meant so much, Hakoda should have left it at home.

“A good leader does not dismiss the beliefs of his people so lightly,” Iroh cautioned, sitting down on his own bunk, opposite Zuko’s. There was about three feet of empty space between them. The rest of the hold was filled with crates and barrels of supplies. “Like it or not,” his uncle went on, “these are your people now.”

With a strangled cry of frustration, Zuko threw the knife down on top of his cloak. “This is ridiculous!” he fumed, pacing the small space. “If there were any waterbenders left here, they would have been sent out to fight us!”

“So it would seem,” Iroh replied evenly. “But you are tired from our journey, Prince Zuko, and still recovering.” Zuko flinched at the reminder, one hand instinctively moving towards the bandaged half of his face, but he checked the motion with great effort, clenching his hand into a fist instead. “Why don’t you rest for a while?” his uncle suggested.

“No,” Zuko insisted, marching the short distance to the chest at the foot of his bunk that was filled with scrolls, everything they had been able to find about the Southern Water Tribe in the royal library. “I have work to do.” He had skimmed over most of the information as they had sailed south, but now that they were here, he could begin his research in a more focused manner, starting with how to construct buildings out of ice. Then, later, he would have to do a formal census - that shouldn’t take long - and draft his first report to his father.

“Very well,” Iroh said reluctantly. “Would you like some tea while you work?”

Zuko made a vague noise of assent, already focused on his task. He picked out three of the more promising scrolls, then sat down on his bunk to read. He barely noticed when his uncle gently forced a teacup into his hand a short while later.

Ice building didn’t sound like it would be too hard, if he put enough people to work on it. The women here might have been content raising their children in squalid little tents, but he knew they could do better. It would have been even easier with waterbenders, of course…

“Some of the children are quite young,” Zuko mused aloud, looking down at his still untouched teacup.

“Very young indeed,” Iroh agreed.

“One of them might turn out to be a waterbender, someday,” Zuko went on, his grip on the teacup tightening. And a young child, who probably wouldn’t even remember any other chief besides him, surely that child would be loyal to him? And when he had the unquestioned loyalty of a southern waterbender, then he would have met the conditions for his banishment to be lifted, and proved to his father…

“I suppose that might be the case,” Uncle Iroh said. “Destiny, after all, is a funny thing.”

The sun dipped low on his course around the horizon, without fully sinking beneath it, then began his ascent again, marking the next morning. Prince Zuko set up a makeshift desk near where his boat had made landfall, and the old man, General Iroh, escorted the villagers one by one to be interviewed by him. Sokka was first, and Katara would have loved to have been able to eavesdrop - but there was nowhere close enough for her to hide.

“What did he say?” Katara demanded as soon as her brother returned to their tent.

Sokka sat by the fire next to her. “What you’d expect from a Fire Nation jerk,” he said sullenly, hugging his knees to his chest and glaring at the flames. “He wants to send a report to the Fire Lord about the ‘status of the tribe’ - as if the Fire Lord doesn’t know.”

Katara’s hands clenched into fists, and the water boiling in the pot over the fire sloshed dangerously.

“Oh yeah,” Sokka added darkly. “He asked if I was a waterbender.”

With an angry growl, Katara turned away from the fire, putting distance between herself and the simmering pot. There was only one reason he would have asked about that. General Iroh might have said they weren’t there to hurt anyone, but Katara knew what had happened to all the waterbenders in their tribe. All except her.

“When it’s your turn,” Sokka said, gripping her shoulder firmly, “when they ask you, you lie, got it?”

Katara nodded her understanding, hot tears of anger welling up in her eyes. She squeezed them shut. Lying about her bending now would mean hiding it from here on out, as long as their new Fire Nation governor remained. And there was only one way she could see that they might get rid of him. “Did you see it?” she choked out. “Was it real?”

Sokka’s hand fell away from her shoulder. “It’s the real knife, Katara,” he confirmed. “There’s no doubt about it.” He would know, after all, he had studied the knife in their father’s hands on countless long polar nights, as Hakoda had explained to his firstborn all the

symbols carved into it and what they meant, and all the sacred power it held that would one day be in his hands.

All the sacred power that was now in the hands of their enemy.

Katara's turn to be interviewed came not long after. General Iroh smiled gently when he came for her, but she glared at him. He wasn't fooling her. Prince Zuko, at least, didn't bother with any charade of friendliness.

"Your name and age?" he asked bluntly, scowling just like he had yesterday, one good eye conveying enough contempt for two.

"Katara," she replied, scowling right back. "And I'm eleven."

Prince Zuko made a note of this in his ledger, while Katara eyed the knife set casually on the desk by his left hand. As Sokka had said, it was undeniably authentic.

"Your parents?" Prince Zuko questioned, not looking up from the page of his ledger.

"My father is Hakoda," she answered proudly. That did get his attention, and he looked up in surprise. "My mother…"

"Kya, deceased," Prince Zuko supplied for her. "Your brother already told me." He looked back down at his notes, and something inside Katara snapped.

"Did he tell you how she died?" Katara shouted at him. "Did he tell you how your soldiers killed her inside our home, for no reason at all?"

Prince Zuko's hand stilled mid-character. There was a tense moment of silence where Katara's heart pounded, wondering if he would strike her for her insolence. But he merely

shifted his grip on his pen, without looking at her, and made some additional notes. “That should not have happened,” he said tersely. “I will mention it to the Fire Lord in my report.”

“Like the Fire Lord cares,” Katara shot back.

Prince Zuko treated her to an even more ferocious one-eyed glare. “You don’t understand what you’re talking about,” he all but growled at her.

“I don’t understand?” she echoed irately. “You’re the one who has no idea!” If she had control over her bending, she could have cracked the ice beneath him right then and there and let the ocean swallow him up. But her eyes shot back to the knife, and she remembered the boiling pot in her tent, and reined in her anger.

“You’ll see,” Prince Zuko said ominously. What she would see, he did not elaborate on as he finished his notes. “One more question.” He looked her directly in the eye this time. “Are you a waterbender?”

Katara focused on the prince’s one good eye, uncowed by its unblinking gold intensity. “No,” she said. “I’m not.” And she knew that now that he was here, it might as well be true.

On the deck of the ship, Zuko read over his report one last time. The population of the South Pole currently consisted of the following: nine women, ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-eight; ten children, of whom Hakoda’s daughter Katara was the oldest at eleven, and the youngest were still infants in their mothers’ arms; and Sokka, Hakoda’s son, who was the same age as Zuko. Including Zuko and Iroh, that was a total of twenty-two people, soon to be twenty-three, for one of the women was pregnant. Her husband, like all the men, had left with Hakoda.

Though the tribe’s infrastructure was abysmal, the fishing was good. Hunting large game was out of the question for the time being, though Zuko planned to make that his next priority after erecting permanent houses. Eventually, they would need more furs for their own use, as well as to re-establish trade with the southern islands.

He had not identified any waterbenders yet, but seven of the children were still under the age of five, which was generally the latest that bending abilities might manifest, at least in the Fire Nation. Zuko assumed the same was true for waterbenders.

At the end of the report, there was a short paragraph explaining that it seemed Fire Nation soldiers had killed civilians on their last raid. Zuko had hesitated to include that, but he had told the girl he would, and he didn't want to begin his governorship by going back on his word. Besides, his father would want to know the truth, however unpleasant, so long as Zuko presented it in a respectful manner. Which he had.

So why was he reluctant to send the report now?

Zuko rolled up the paper, but made no move to seal it yet. Instead, he looked out at the frigid blue ocean they had crossed to come here, then the vast white expanse of the South Pole. It had all the appearance of emptiness and desolation. Was he holding on to some fool's hope that something more promising would emerge from all that ice and snow? What could they have hidden from him, when the sun had not even set?

With an angry frown, Zuko thrust his hand into the pouch on his belt that held his wax and seal, his fingers brushing against the hilt of the chief's knife as he removed them. Carefully melting the tip of the wax with his firebending, he sealed the report, then stalked over to the perch at the stern of the ship where the messenger hawk was waiting. He slid the scroll into a protective leather tube, sealed that as well, and sent the hawk on its way.

It would take at least three days for the messenger hawk to reach the nearest Fire Nation relay tower, and another three or four from there for the message to be sent on to the capital. If his father replied immediately, the earliest Zuko could expect a response would be in two weeks.

He watched the hawk until it was a distant black dot in the sky. Then he disembarked from the ship and headed towards the village. By the time the hawk returned, he planned to have many accomplishments to report.

When the sun had made another circuit around the horizon, General Iroh gathered everyone in the village together to hear the next pronouncement from their new chief, now that he had sent his report to the Fire Lord. Katara knew her father would have called the tribe together himself, but Prince Zuko was apparently above such things.

There were cautious whispers about what the prince might want with them as they waited for him to arrive. All the people of the South Pole had ever known the Fire Nation to do was kill and destroy, and it was hard to imagine anything else. They didn't have the resources of the Earth Kingdom to exploit, or the wealth to tax. Surely the Fire Lord hadn't sent his son here just to collect seal jerky and salted fish from them. But what other motive there might be, they could not guess.

Prince Zuko came dressed in the same armor and cloak he had worn on his first appearance. Katara noticed this time how the cloak dragged behind him in the snow. It really was too big, and very impractical - it wasn't even lined with fur. Maybe he would catch his death of cold, Katara thought hopefully.

But Prince Zuko was also now wearing the chief's knife openly on his hip, and he placed one hand on it as he spoke. "My first act as governor," he declared with his customary grim demeanor, "will be to improve the inadequate housing in your village."

"You expect us to build you a palace?" Sokka spoke up boldly, crossing his arms over his chest. Their father had always known how to gracefully take criticism, but there was no telling how this Fire Nation prince would react.

Prince Zuko's uncovered eye narrowed. "I expect you to build houses for yourselves," he clarified. "I've been reading about ice construction, and there's no reason for you to be living in tents…"

"Prince Zuko," Katara heard Gran Gran's voice from behind her, perfectly respectful but very firm. "Do you know what happened to the ice houses we used to have?"

The prince frowned. "I understand that there have been...difficulties, in recent years, but now…"

“Many buildings were destroyed by your soldiers,” Gran Gran answered her own question, a remarkably patient explanation in Katara’s opinion. “Many more were damaged, and of course it became harder to repair them the fewer waterbenders we had left.” Katara had thought Prince Zuko could not frown any deeper, but he proved her wrong. And still, Gran Gran went on. “Then there were the houses where our people were killed, which had to be torn down.”

Katara looked away from the prince, her fists clenched in anger. Her own home had been one of those razed to ward off the dark spirits, after the violence done there three years ago. Her father had done most of the demolition himself, refusing help from anyone, even Bato, until he had nearly exhausted himself. There had been no question of rebuilding then, and no real possibility of it once the men had left. But now this Fire Nation prince came and spoke of ice houses as if he knew, as if he understood…

“But it’s still possible to build new houses, even without waterbenders,” Prince Zuko was insisting. “Who here has experience in construction?”

There was an awkward silence. Sokka stepped forward without a word.

“That’s it?” the prince asked incredulously. No offense to her brother, Katara thought, but hadn’t he seen the wall? What had given him the impression they had a master builder among them?

“Well, there are no waterbenders,” Sokka pointed out. *Thanks to you* , was the unspoken implication, at least as Katara heard it. “And otherwise building is left to the men, and the rest of them aren’t here.” *Also thanks to you.*

Prince Zuko’s whole body seemed to tense, and his uncovered eye screwed shut. Behind his shoulder, General Iroh said something in a low voice, and the prince let out a frustrated sigh. Katara thought she saw flames lick his lips.

“Fine,” the prince said tersely. He opened his eye, gaze sweeping over the crowd. “Sokka will confer with me and my uncle about the plans for new construction. The rest of you are dismissed.”

It was nothing at all against her brother, but Katara hoped they failed. She hoped a block of ice fell on Zuko's head and killed him, and Iroh went away and never came back, and the whole Fire Nation left them alone with their sealskin tents that no one had complained about before her father left.

But so far, nothing had gone as she had hoped.

Sokka was wary about following Zuko and Iroh onto their ship, though he did a good job hiding it. Zuko had to begrudgingly respect the other boy's fortitude. Rather than squeeze three people into the cramped hold of the ship, Zuko told Sokka to wait on deck while he and Iroh brought up everything they would need - the relevant scrolls from the library, paper and ink, cushions to sit on, and, at his uncle's insistence, tea. Zuko cast a glance at the messenger hawk's empty perch as the three of them settled into a circle and Iroh boiled the kettle.

"Those are Water Tribe scrolls," Sokka said in amazement when Zuko unrolled the first document he wanted to go over. "Where did you get those?"

Zuko glanced at the scroll in question, which had to be at least a hundred years old. The parchment was thicker than any produced in the Fire Nation, and the characters were written in a different script style that had taken Zuko a while to get used to reading. If Sokka recognized it, that meant the other boy could read, which would save them a lot of time.

"They were in the palace library," Zuko answered his question, although it was beside the point.

"How did they get there?" Sokka asked suspiciously.

"I don't know," Zuko replied. "It doesn't matter."

"What I think Prince Zuko means," Iroh said pointedly in response to Sokka's obvious displeasure with Zuko's answer, "is that the royal library is very old, and these particular

texts have been part of the collection for some time."

Sokka nodded in understanding, somewhat mollified, though Zuko noticed his uncle's careful specification. These particular scrolls had come to the Fire Nation ages ago, but there were others still below deck that had definitely been acquired by the Southern Raiders in more recent times, including the few waterbending scrolls he had. Zuko decided not to mention them.

Trying to bring the conversation back to the point, Zuko turned the scroll to face Sokka and tapped the parchment with one finger. "This author's focus was more aesthetic than structural, but it's the best information I have. You must already know some of it…" But Sokka clearly had stopped listening as he leaned forward, eyes roaming eagerly over the characters on the scroll. Zuko accepted a cup of tea from his uncle, and let the other boy read.

"That's probably why it keeps collapsing," Sokka muttered to himself after a moment, which did not inspire Zuko with great confidence in his experience. But like the scroll, this was the best he had to work with. He would make the most of it.

Sokka turned out to be a fast reader. "Okay," he said a few minutes later, accepting his own cup of tea from Iroh. "That is helpful. What else you got?"

They spent the next two hours going over all of Zuko's information, comparing it to what Sokka knew, and drawing up rough sketches for modest ice houses that they thought would be achievable. It was odd, Zuko thought, that the son of the former chief would work with him with so little complaint. But Sokka was adapting to the tribe's new circumstances far more readily than his sister or anyone else seemed to be. As much as the other boy clearly resented Zuko, he knew how to put the good of his people before his own feelings.

The thought spurred an irrational wave of anger that Zuko quickly stamped down. If Sokka could do it, so could he.

The sun repeated his circular dance several times, and Sokka began helping Zuko and Iroh build an actual ice house. Katara got part of her wish - the first attempt did fall down, though

no one was hurt. She knew she really should have been grateful that it hadn't killed her brother.

On the second attempt, Katara watched them more closely. It looked like they had made the walls thicker, which made the footprint of the house smaller, though it was still, admittedly, far bigger than a tent. "Go away, Katara," Sokka chided her as he and Zuko positioned another block of ice on what would be the back wall of the house, if they were successful. "We don't need kids hanging around while we work."

"She's not getting in the way," Iroh came to her defense. "Let her watch, if she's curious."

But Katara knew what Sokka was really worried about - that she would lose control of her volatile waterbending again, and give away her secret. She had accidentally frozen Sokka's bowl of soup last night at dinner when they had argued about this very subject, her older brother insisting that she stay as far away from Zuko and Iroh as possible and Katara protesting that he shouldn't be hanging around them all day either if they were really so dangerous.

But they both knew Sokka was right. The danger was far greater for her. She just hated feeling left behind, like the Fire Nation was taking her brother away from her, too.

"Like I really want to watch you stack ice cubes just so they can fall down again," Katara scoffed, and stomped away to find something else to do.

The second house also collapsed, a few hours later. Katara was pretty sure it wasn't her fault, no matter what Sokka said.

The fourteenth cycle of never-ending day since Zuko had arrived at the South Pole came and went. The raw skin under Zuko's bandages hurt less, and itched more, which Uncle Iroh assured him was a sign it was healing. He still refused to look anywhere near the mirror when the bandages were off.

The messenger hawk did not return, nor was another sent in its place. Iroh gently urged him to be patient, and perhaps it was for the best. He and Sokka had not yet managed to build a stable ice structure, the rest of the tribe was as wary of him as ever, and he was, of course, no closer to identifying a single waterbender, let alone winning their unquestioned loyalty. If his father's reply came now, he would have nothing new to report.

"If we can't figure out how to make the walls sturdy enough on their own," Sokka mused, snapping Zuko out of his reverie. "Maybe we could reinforce them?"

Zuko tore his eyes away from the empty messenger hawk perch to focus on the other boy, once again seated across from him on the deck of his ship, with all of their notes and schematics spread out between them. "Reinforce them with what?" he asked. "Wood?"

Sokka shook his head. "Wood's too hard to come by," he said. "And whalebone wouldn't be strong enough. I was thinking metal."

"Metal," Zuko echoed in a skeptical deadpan. "Where are we going to get metal?"

"Well," Sokka replied, stretching out the word and tilting his head to one side, considering. "I honestly wasn't going to say anything, but there's an old Fire Nation ship stranded in the ice a few miles east of here…"

"And you think we could salvage what we need from that," Zuko finished for him.

"Maybe," Sokka said with a shrug, glancing away. Zuko looked back down at their most recent schematics, thinking. It *could* work...he and Iroh would be able to set up a makeshift forge, use their firebending to shape the old iron to suit their needs, if it was in good enough condition…

"Why weren't you going to say anything?" Zuko asked, wondering if the shipwreck was even more of a longshot than Sokka had made it out to be.

“My dad said the ship was off limits, for everyone,” Sokka replied bluntly. His eyes flicked to the knife that Zuko now routinely wore at his hip, and there was a hint of something dark in his face. “But you’re in charge now, right?”

Saying *Yes, I am,* would have felt childish. He didn’t blame Sokka for still wanting to follow his father’s orders, as inexplicable as many of Hakoda’s choices seemed. A son should honor his father’s wishes, even if he didn’t understand...but a Water Tribe peasant should obey a Fire Nation prince, even a dishonored one.

Zuko collected the papers and got to his feet. “We’ll check it out tomorrow,” he told Sokka. “Go home.”

Below deck, Zuko stowed the papers and sat on his bunk. He removed the knife from his belt and studied it once again. It was carved from a single piece of bone, with a notched hilt and slightly rounded blade. The blade was not very long, only about the length of his hand. It was etched with various animal forms on one side, and abstract symbols on the other. They weren’t any characters Zuko recognized, and while the chief’s knife and its significance to the tribe were mentioned in all the Water Tribe histories he had, none of them went into great detail about the carvings.

Zuko traced the symbols with his thumb. Most of them made use of curved lines, probably a reference to waves, or to the crescent moon. Only one, close to the hilt, was a pointed shape, open on one side. Zuko wondered if Hakoda knew what the carvings meant. He wondered if his father had gotten that information when the former chief had surrendered, if he would tell Zuko if he asked…

Uncle Iroh calling his name from outside drew Zuko out of his thoughts, and he went back above deck to discover the messenger hawk’s perch once again occupied, by a smaller, darker bird than the one he had sent out. Iroh was unfastening the leather case from its leg, and Zuko eagerly snatched the letter from his hands once he had got it free.

He broke the seal without even looking at it, drank in the characters hungrily...then crumpled up the paper, set it on fire, and hurled it off the side of the ship into the dark waters. The letter was nothing more than a short missive from the Minister for Colonial Affairs, acknowledging receipt of his report and instructing him to address all further correspondence to his office directly. The Fire Lord was too busy to personally oversee all his governors.

“I take it that was not good news?” Uncle Iroh prompted gently.

Without a reply, Zuko stalked over to the hatch and jumped down into the hold, ignoring the ladder. Throwing open the trunk at the foot of his uncle’s bunk, he pulled out the mirror and set it against the bulkhead. He glared at it for a moment, and his one-eyed reflection glared back.

“Prince Zuko?” came his uncle’s concerned voice as Iroh made his way below deck far more carefully. But Zuko already had the bandages halfway off by the time Iroh’s hand landed on his shoulder. “Are you certain you want to…” He trailed off, following Zuko’s gaze to the mirror as the last strips of linen fell away.

A new face gazed back at them. On one side, it was almost unchanged, the same almond-shaped eye and arched brow, different only in the shaved scalp from the face he had always worn. But on the other side, the brow was gone, the eye fixed in a permanent squint, the ear deformed, and the flesh an angry red and hideously rippled. This was not the face of Prince Zuko, heir to the throne of the Fire Nation.

This was the face of Zuko, chief of the Southern Water Tribe.

Chapter 2: The First Year, Part One

The first time Katara saw Zuko without the bandages, she stared. She couldn't help it. She didn't know what she had expected - obviously something had to be wrong with his face, or he wouldn't have been wearing the bandages in the first place - but she hadn't imagined it would be *that* bad. It looked like someone had tried to burn half his face off, and the scar tissue was still fresh and tender around his eye.

Katara knew better than to ask what had happened, but Zuko did notice her staring. He glared at her, and with the scar the effect was even more menacing than usual. Katara took an involuntary step back, then promptly scolded herself for it.

"Where's your brother?" Zuko asked.

"Inside," Katara replied, pointing her thumb over her shoulder at the tent. Sokka getting ready to go out in the morning was always a slow business. "Are you really going out to the shipwreck?"

Zuko's glare softened into something less like resentment of her very existence and more like annoyed curiosity. "You know about it, too?"

"Everybody knows about it," Katara scoffed. "It's from the first raid, which was ages ago, back when Gran Gran was young." She forced a shrug, trying to appear casual, but unable to resist adding: "Back when we still had waterbenders."

The softer glare turned hard again. "I see," Zuko said.

Katara really didn't think he did. "People were killed on that ship," she pointed out. "Our people, and theirs. It's probably filled with dark spirits." Was there nothing in those scrolls of his that explained what could happen on the long polar nights, in places where blood had been spilled, the effects of which could still be felt even in the bright summer?

“Dark spirits,” Zuko repeated, unimpressed. “That’s what you’re afraid of?”

If he didn’t believe her, Katara wasn’t going to waste her time arguing. “There could be booby traps, too,” she suggested, as an afterthought.

Zuko rolled his eyes. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he said dismissively.

“Katara says stuff that doesn’t make sense all the time,” Sokka replied, stepping out of the tent at last. He yawned and stretched dramatically. “Alright, Operation: Plunder the Fire Navy, let’s get started!”

“It’s not a military operation, and we’re not calling it that,” Zuko said in an exasperated tone. “Uncle’s waiting. Let’s go.” He turned and stalked away, obviously expecting Sokka to follow him.

“Have fun with Chief Jerkface,” Katara muttered under her breath, so only her brother could hear.

Sokka turned and gave her an apologetic smile. “Believe me,” he said conspiratorially, “you’re gonna have a way better time here doing laundry with Gran Gran.”

Katara returned the smile, but in the distance Zuko stopped and shouted for Sokka to hurry up, and from the excited spring in her brother’s step as he ran after the prince, Katara kind of doubted he really meant it. She ducked back inside the tent, feeling resentful again. Before Zuko had come, doing laundry would have at least been an excuse to practice waterbending. Gran Gran always let her try to dry the clothes that way. But now, it was too risky.

Before Zuko had come, Gran Gran would have made Sokka help them with their chores, too.

The wrecked ship was a battle cruiser, a model so old Zuko had only seen it in diagrams and illustrations of battles during his grandfather's reign. It was held high above the surface by massive icy protrusions that could only have been made by a team of waterbenders, further testament to how long ago it had been stranded there. Its pointed prow was angled up into the air, and from the masthead the flag of the Southern Raiders still fluttered in the slight breeze.

"This ship is remarkably well preserved," Iroh commented, breaking the silence of the two boys staring up at it.

"Yeah, well," Sokka said. "Nobody's touched it in decades."

Zuko's eyes dropped from the ship to the ice holding it up. "I guess we have to climb," he observed, flexing one bare hand. His inner fire could keep him warm enough, but he didn't relish the idea of scrambling for handholds on the icy surface.

"You should have brought gloves," Sokka commented wryly, before jogging the rest of the way to the ship and starting the climb, using his boomerang as a makeshift ice pick.

Wordlessly, Iroh removed an extra pair of black gloves from some hidden pocket underneath his cloak and offered them to Zuko. Zuko snatched them from his uncle's hands with a growl of annoyance, put them on, and followed after Sokka.

The climb was hard work, and they didn't talk much in the process. The two boys finally clambered onto the deck of the ship fairly winded, but Zuko didn't take more than a moment to catch his breath. Looking around, he could see the ship was nearly intact. They had come up by the stern, and the broken remains of a catapult were all that was left out in the open. But a hatch in the ship's tower hung wide, the deck slanting up to the opening into an ominous dark interior.

"So what do you think?" Sokka asked, still a little breathless from the climb. He pounded a fist against the metal deck plates. "Is this usable?"

Zuko got to his feet as best as he could on the slanted surface, a sort of half-crouch. "Maybe," he said. There were patches of rust here and there, but some of the exterior plating could

probably be salvaged. “The interior could be in better condition,” he speculated, making his way towards the hatch.

“The interior, right,” he heard Sokka mutter as he followed behind him. “Good thing neither of us is scared of ghosts.”

Climbing carefully through the hatchway, Zuko found that the temperature dropped significantly as soon as he stepped out of the sun. He tugged off one glove and lit a small flame in the palm of his hand to ward off both the cold and the dark. “Stay close,” he admonished Sokka, and they began the climb up the tower to the bridge.

As he had expected, there were fewer signs of rust inside the ship. But Zuko wasn’t just thinking of building materials now. If the people of the tribe had left the ship untouched all these years, there could be any number of valuable things still aboard - weapons, tools, even charts and other documents. While they were here, it would be worth their while to look.

“This doesn’t creep you out at all?” Sokka asked as they passed through a dim beam of light shining through a narrow porthole, about halfway up the tower. “Sneaking around on a dead ship?”

“We’re not sneaking,” Zuko corrected him, continuing his climb into the darkness. The angle of the ship made the zig-zagging metal stairs perilously steep in one direction, and awkwardly shallow in the other. “And the ship isn’t dead. It was never alive.”

“You know what I mean,” Sokka protested irritably as they clambered from a steep to a shallow section, the scuffling of their hands and feet against the metal echoing dully in the otherwise silent space. The porthole now below them, the only light came from the flame in Zuko’s hand, which cast jagged, dancing shadows around them.

“I really don’t,” Zuko replied, halting his progress momentarily. “You said yourself you don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Sokka’s voice cracked, and he broke off abruptly. “Never mind,” he muttered. “Let’s just get this over with.”

As they reached the top of the tower, dim light began to filter in again, and patches of ice and snow made the slanted stairs even more treacherous. The hatchway to the bridge they found hanging open just like the one at the deck level, and the glass viewport was smashed. The room had been left exposed to the elements, and was in total disarray. Instruments were rusted and cracked, debris littered the floor, and a fine coating of snow covered nearly everything. Through the open viewport, there was a cold but gentle breeze.

"Great," Sokka said dryly when he saw the state of the bridge. "There can't be much of use left here."

But another thought occurred to Zuko. "Where are all the bodies?" he wondered aloud, snuffing out the now unnecessary flame in his hand. For even here on the bridge, there was no sign of the ship's crew.

"They would have been given to the ocean," Sokka replied to his rhetorical question, giving him a strange look. "We wouldn't have just left them."

"Given to the ocean?" Zuko repeated in alarm, giving Sokka a sharp look. "You threw them in the water?" That was an ignominious way to dispose of a body in the Fire Nation, but for the Water Tribe…

"That's what we always do with the dead," Sokka confirmed his suspicion, sounding a little defensive. "Wasn't that in any of your reading?"

Zuko looked away, around the ruined bridge. "No," he admitted. The funerary rites of the Southern Water Tribe, like the symbols on the chief's knife and most of their religious practices, apparently hadn't interested the chroniclers in the Fire Nation very much. But if the bodies of the crew had been treated respectfully by the Water Tribe's primitive standards, he supposed that was the best that could have been hoped for. "Let's just see what's here anyway."

Sokka grumbled some additional complaint under his breath but complied, and the two boys shifted through the wreckage looking for anything of value. The ship's compass was still

pointing north, and with several minutes of combined effort they managed to work it free of its mounting.

"I wonder if…" Sokka began, inspecting the newly detached instrument. But whatever he was about to say was lost in a startled shriek at the sound of a loud *thud* from behind them. In his haste to grab his boomerang, Sokka all but threw the compass in the air, and Zuko had to scramble to catch it.

"Who's there!" Sokka cried out, voice cracking again. But, of course, there was no one.

Zuko carefully scanned their surroundings for the source of the noise. "Look," he said, shoving the compass back into Sokka's hands and picking up a heavy leather bound book that hadn't been on the deck a moment ago. "This must have fallen off of one of the shelves."

Sokka did not look convinced. "The shelves are slanted towards the wall," he pointed out. "Things shouldn't just be falling off them."

"There's a draught," Zuko said with a shrug. "And maybe we rattled stuff around getting the compass out." At Sokka's continued look of skepticism, he scoffed, "What, do you think a ghost did it?"

"Of course not," Sokka replied indignantly, shifting the compass to one hand and returning his boomarang to its holster. "What is that thing anyway?"

Zuko flipped the book open and skimmed the first few pages. "It's the captain's log," he said in surprise. "This shouldn't be here." Naval captains usually kept their logs in their private quarters, for security. It was a strange breach of protocol for it to be left on the bridge.

"Well, does it have anything interesting to tell us?" Sokka asked.

Zuko flipped the pages until he came to the last entry. The captain had recorded the sighting of land, and wrote of the crew's anticipation for the coming battle with the Southern Water

Tribe, expressing some misgivings about whether they would be able to satisfy the Fire Lord's orders to…

Zuko slammed the book shut, shoving it into Sokka's hands as he had done with the compass. The other boy fumbled to get a grip on both objects. "So that's a yes then?" he guessed.

But Zuko wasn't listening. With a growl he turned back towards the shattered viewport and threw a flaming punch that sent fire shooting out into the cold air. The Fire Lord's orders. That was what he was here to carry out as well. Except fifty years ago, a previous Fire Lord had already ordered the captain of this ship to make sure there were no waterbenders left at the south pole.

"Let's go," Zuko barked out the order before Sokka could comment on his childish outburst. His uncle must have seen that, too, and would be worrying about him. Besides, they had found out what they needed to know for now.

"But what about…" Sokka began as he hastily followed Zuko back into the stairway.

"We'll come back another time," Zuko cut him off.

Their climb down the tower and back to the ground was completed in silence. Sure enough, Iroh met them looking troubled. "Prince Zuko…" he began, reaching out to lay a concerned hand on Zuko's arm.

"I'm fine," Zuko insisted, roughly shrugging off his uncle's touch. Iroh sighed, but said nothing more on the rest of their somber trek back to the village.

Sokka turned fourteen in the middle of the summer, when Zuko had been there for just over a month. Katara helped Gran Gran make his favorite breakfast - seal jerky and snow gull eggs - and they presented him with a new pair of mittens. Sokka thanked them politely, but they all knew the practical gift was a meager substitute for what he really wanted. This was the

birthday when their father should have taken Sokka ice dodging. But it didn't look like that was ever going to happen now.

Instead, Sokka spent the whole day with Zuko and Iroh, again, putting the finishing touches on the metal-framed ice house. Unlike their first attempts, this building seemed much sturdier, at least to Katara's eye when she went to fetch Sokka for dinner. Her brother still wouldn't let her inspect their work too closely, but he did look pleased with himself as they headed home.

"Did you at least rig it to collapse on them?" Katara asked darkly when they were out of earshot of their Fire Nation chief and his uncle.

"No," Sokka replied. "They're still going to be living on their ship anyway. This house is for Sunniva and her kids."

"Oh," Katara said in surprise, coming to a halt. Sunniva was going to give birth in a few months. It would be nice for her youngest child to be born in a real house, instead of a tent. But she hadn't thought Zuko or Iroh would care. "How'd you convince them to do that?"

Sokka had stopped a few paces ahead of her. "I didn't have to," he said, turning back to face her. "Zuko's plan was to build houses for the people of the village all along, remember?" Katara did remember, but she hadn't believed him. "And Iroh had the idea that Sunniva should get the first one," Sokka went on. "Since she's, well…" He made a gesture with both hands in front of his stomach, pantomiming Sunniva's large belly.

Katara rolled her eyes. "Since she's pregnant?" she supplied. Boys were so immature about pregnancy, Sokka couldn't even say the word.

"Yeah, that," Sokka agreed, sheepishly letting his hands drop to his sides. "So, anyway, I made sure the house is good and stable for her."

"Well, that's good, then," Katara said, folding her arms. Though she still would have loved to see the house collapse on their new chief's head, Sunniva's family having a sturdy home was

also good for the tribe. The ice walls would keep them warmer than a tent could, and her new baby would have a better chance. “I just can’t believe Zuko really meant it.”

Sokka shrugged. “Zuko’s a pretty straightforward guy. I don’t think he’d bother lying about something like that.” Then he looked away towards the horizon, squinting at the sun. “Even if he is a firebending jerk.”

Katara frowned at this pronouncement. She and Sokka always called Zuko a jerk, between themselves, because he was and not even holding the chief’s knife could change that. But this time, she got the impression that Sokka almost regretted it. “Right,” she said emphatically, to bolster her brother’s faltering resolve. “He’s a no good, royal pain in the butt, Fire Nation jerk.”

Sokka looked back at her and smiled. “And don’t you ever forget it,” he said, throwing an arm around her shoulders and drawing her briefly to his side, the hand clad in one of his new mittens that Katara had helped Gran Gran embroider squeezing her shoulder.

They went home for dinner, and as a final treat for Sokka’s birthday Gran Gran surprised them with a bowl of salmonberry akutaq for dessert. Katara savored the sticky-sweet mixture, knowing it was an extra special treat this year, for they would have to stretch their seal blubber stores as far as they could. There wouldn’t exactly be anyone around to go out on another seal hunt in the spring, like the men usually did.

That thought did somewhat spoil Katara’s enjoyment of the dessert. And judging by how slowly Sokka was eating his portion - which he would normally have wolfed down - she guessed the same thing had occurred to him.

Sunniva and her children would have a warm, safe place to live, and maybe they did have Zuko and Iroh to thank for helping make that happen. But the Fire Nation had still taken far more from their tribe than they had given.

“No way,” Sokka said when Zuko suggested a hunting party towards the end of the summer. “We don’t have enough people.”

“The two of us, plus Uncle,” Zuko argued, folding his arms. “And then the three most capable women. That’s plenty.”

Across from him at the low table that served as Zuko’s desk on the deck of his ship, Sokka scoffed. “The women don’t hunt.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Zuko shot back. Before he’d come to the south pole, he’d never heard anyone claim there were things women didn’t do. His sister was certainly capable of anything. “What do the women do, if they can’t provide for the tribe?”

“They do woman stuff,” Sokka replied with an unconvincing shrug. “I dunno, ask Katara.” His eyes narrowed. “Or Gran Gran. Ask her.”

“I believe what Sokka is trying to say,” Uncle Iroh put in gently, leaning across the table between them to refill both of their teacups. “Is that while the women of this tribe are unparalleled in such skills as sewing, cooking, and tending to the sick, and quite passable at fishing and foraging, they have never been trained in the art of hunting large game.” He set the teapot down, and rested his hands on his knees. “Given that you and I are also inexperienced in that area, Prince Zuko, it might be a bit much to expect Sokka to take out a hunting party of pure novices.”

“Right,” Sokka agreed, picking up his teacup. “What he said.”

“We don’t have to go after large game yet,” Zuko continued to argue, ignoring his own teacup. “Even a seal hunt would be better than nothing.”

“Seal hunting is done in the spring,” Sokka said archly, and Zuko belatedly remembered that he had read that in one of the scrolls in his collection about Water Tribe customs. But surely an exception could be made, in dire circumstances such as they now found themselves.

“We need food for the winter,” Zuko pointed out. “And pelts ready to offer the traders by the time they come in the spring. We can’t afford to wait.”

Sokka, who had just taken a large sip of his tea, winced at how hot it was and blew out several short breaths. “We’ll have fish,” he said, a bit breathlessly, then cleared his throat. “And we can keep laying snares for small game. But…”

“Small game is worthless!” Zuko exclaimed in frustration. A few arctic hare pelts weren’t going to get this tribe the tools and supplies they needed to become prosperous again. Even the seals wouldn’t be enough in the long run - they needed to be able to hunt whale sharks, or at least moose elk, if their village was ever going to be more than a half-starved assortment of ignorant peasants. “I can’t believe you people leave your women so helpless, and then the men just run off and abandon them!”

Sokka set down his teacup with great force, spilling tea onto the table and Zuko’s page of careful calculations for their winter stores. “Oh, I’m sure the Fire Lord would love to hear all about how pathetic and helpless we are,” he said darkly. “Why don’t you tell him in your next report?”

With a growl, Zuko got to his feet. “Get off my ship,” he spat.

“Gladly,” Sokka spat back, and did just that, muttering under his breath the whole way. Zuko tried to ignore him, but heard the words *spoiled jerkbender* nonetheless.

Iroh must have caught Sokka’s parting words as well, for he put a hand on Zuko’s shoulder. “He doesn’t mean that,” Zuko’s uncle tried to reassure him.

“Yes, he does,” Zuko shot back, shrugging off his uncle’s hand and sitting back down. Even if he didn’t have a hunt to plan, he *did* have a report to write - not to the Fire Lord, but to the minister for colonial affairs, as he had been directed. There was success to tell of in their construction projects, at least, if not in any other area. Opening his inkwell and drawing a fresh sheet of paper, Zuko set himself to writing.

It didn’t shock him, Zuko thought as he worked and let his tea go cold, to hear what Sokka really thought of him. He knew he wasn’t welcome here at the south pole, knew all the people of the tribe resented him to greater or lesser degree - and certainly much greater in

Katara's case than in Sokka's, for whatever reason. But it was an unwelcome reminder of just how difficult the conditions of his banishment would be to lift.

Everyone in the tribe respected the supposed power of the chief's knife, and feared the might of the Fire Nation. But no one would ever be *loyal* to someone they thought was a spoiled jerkbender.

Well, if that was what they thought of him, Zuko thought as he signed his name at the bottom of his report with forceful strokes, he would just have to prove them wrong.

In her dreams, she could still see the man's face, as clearly as the day it had happened.

She had run back to the house when the raiders had come, expecting it to be safe. Her mother was there, after all, and she was always safe in her mother's arms. But her mother had not been the only person she had found there.

The man was tall, his height exaggerated in her dreams, but the harsh lines of his face were the same. Most of all, she remembered he had dark eyes. She had thought that firebenders all had yellow eyes, bright and dangerous like their element. But his eyes were dark and cold. His eyes were dead.

"Go find your dad, sweetie. I'll handle this."

Katara had obeyed. She had run back out into the chaos outside, as fast as her legs would carry her, screaming for her father. He had come, but too late. Her mother had not handled it after all.

And the man with the cold, dead eyes had disappeared, to haunt Katara's nightmares for years to come.

This time, when she fled the house, she found that all the Fire Nation soldiers outside had his face, those same dark eyes repeated over and over again. She searched and searched for her father until at last she found him, engaged in single combat with one of the invaders. She shouted to him that Mom was in trouble - but in this dream, he didn't hear her.

Instead, the soldier he was fighting knocked him to the ground, and stood triumphant over him, holding the chief's knife. And that was when Katara realized that this soldier alone among the invaders had a different face - Zuko's face, with the unmistakable scar and the burning gold eyes, like she'd always thought a firebender should have.

She woke with a gasp to someone shaking her by the shoulder, and frantically swatted the hand away. "Hey!" Sokka protested, keeping his voice low. "It's just me!"

Blinking in the darkness, Katara breathed deeply, steadying herself. There was the musty smell of the tent, her brother in the sleeping bag next to her, and the sound of Gran Gran's snores coming from the sleeping bag on the other side of him. Everything was normal, as it should be.

Except her mother was dead, her father was locked up in some far away Fire Nation prison, the Fire Lord's son was here, at the South Pole, as their chief, and she had to hide her waterbending. *Nothing* was the way it should be.

"Are you...okay?" came Sokka's whispered question, after a moment.

Grateful that it was dark, Katara squeezed her eyes shut against her tears. Sokka always tried to make the best of their situation, but he didn't seem to understand the depth of her feelings - the depth of her anger. They shouldn't have to bow and scrape and try to get along with some spoiled Fire Nation prince, while the man with the cold eyes who had killed their mother was still out there, still walking free. Maybe Zuko even knew who he was…

"It was just a dream," Katara whispered back. "About Mom."

She felt Sokka scoot closer in his sleeping bag, and one of his hands found hers, squeezing it tightly. She didn't expect him to say anything else to console her - she'd had these dreams

before, and Sokka knew there was nothing he could say to make it better. And sure enough, he was silent for a long time, just holding her hand, until Katara had almost sunk back into sleep.

But then, just before she drifted off completely, she heard him whisper once more, perhaps as much to himself as to her: “It won’t always be this way.”

In his dreams, the Agni Kai never went quite the same way. Zuko’s actual memory of the event was full of holes - blackouts, his uncle called them. He didn’t remember taking his place on the dias, or turning to face his opponent when the duel began. He knew he had knelt and pleaded with his father, but he had only a vague idea of what he had said, and of his father’s responses. Yet even if he had forgotten the exact words that had been spoken, he could remember the feelings and sensations vividly. Terror. Humiliation. Searing pain and the smell of burning flesh.

And in his dreams, his imagination filled in the rest.

“Stand and fight, Prince Zuko,” his father’s voice commanded, imperious and cold, echoing from the shadows that rendered the larger-than-life figure of the Fire Lord even more ominous. “Have you less honor than the Water Tribe chief’s son?”

“No!” Zuko protested, but still he knelt, immobilized. “I am your loyal son! I will do anything for the Fire Nation!” Anything but fight his own father. That was simply impossible.

Yet Sokka had fought, even when it had been impossible. He had not backed down from a hopeless struggle, he had not given up. Not until he had seen the knife.

“You will learn respect,” his father said, holding the chief’s knife aloft. “And the Water Tribe will be your teacher.”

In his dreams, the Agni Kai was never exactly the same. This time it was the knife, not the flames, that savaged his face. Somehow, it was still burning hot.

Zuko awoke with a shout, in the darkness that graced the south pole, briefly, when it was truly the middle of the night, now that summer had passed into the early autumn. He was drenched in sweat, and the cold air was a shock against his skin. He heard a noise, and hastily lit a small flame in the palm of one hand.

There was the chief's knife, innocently laid out with his clothes at the foot of his bunk. And across the hold, there was his uncle in his own bunk, just stirring awake. "Prince Zuko?" Iroh asked groggily, pushing himself up on one elbow. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Uncle," Zuko replied. The hand holding the flame was shaking, making the dance of the shadows it cast erratic.

Iroh sat up fully, and fixed him with a level gaze. "The dreams again?"

"It's nothing," Zuko insisted. "Go back to sleep." Dreams were just nonsense, and anyway, wasn't his uncle the one always saying how important it was for a man to get his rest?

But Iroh only sighed, stretched, and got up from his bunk. "An old man like me can't fall back asleep that easily," he said with good humor. "The sun will be up soon anyway. Why don't I make us some tea?"

Zuko acquiesced, and Iroh lit the lantern hanging from the low ceiling of the hold, then busied himself with the tea kettle and fixing breakfast. Snuffing out the flame in his palm, Zuko watched his uncle go about the mundane tasks. When he wanted to, Iroh could fall asleep at the drop of a hat. Zuko knew this was all a show for his own benefit.

The congee that his uncle made for them was sweeter than usual - he had dipped into their small reserve of honey to make it just the way Zuko liked, the way his mother used to serve it. "Thank you, Uncle," Zuko said softly, when they were done eating.

Iroh gave him a fond smile. “You didn’t think I would forget, did you?” he asked with a chuckle. Taking the empty bowls away, he dug momentarily in the trunk where he kept his own belongings and removed a book tied with a red ribbon. “Happy birthday, Prince Zuko,” he said, handing Zuko the gift.

Zuko hadn’t thought his uncle would forget, so much as he had assumed they had more important things to worry about now than celebrating his birthday - past the end of the summer, when the sun was rapidly decreasing, an inauspicious time in the Fire Nation only made more pronounced at the south pole. If Iroh had a gift for him, he must have planned it months ago, before they had left. Probably even before his banishment.

Zuko accepted the book solemnly, untying the ribbon to flip through its pages. It was a collection of musical pieces by a classical Fire Nation composer.

“You know I brought the tsungi horn, and the pipa, though I can’t play them as well as you,” Iroh explained as Zuko looked over a particular piece. Sight-reading, he could hear the melody in his head - on the pipa it would sound cheerful, the tsungi horn might give it a hint of melancholy. “You ought to keep up with your music,” Iroh advised him with a gentle wag of his finger. “It will be like a little piece of home.”

Zuko didn’t want to be rude, but his uncle’s words pierced him to the heart. He shut the book with a snap. “I don’t have time for music,” he said through gritted teeth. Playing the tsungi horn wouldn’t help the tribe get back on its feet, or earn him the loyalty of anyone at the south pole, waterbender or otherwise. It would do nothing to bring him closer to going home.

Ignoring his uncle’s disappointed look, Zuko got up and dressed, bundling into the heavy red cloak that was daily seeming less and less adequate against the polar chill. Sokka and the others, of course, wore fur-lined parkas, but no one in the Fire Nation had any means to make such garments. He would have to tough it out, until a hunt could be arranged - and even then, the best furs would be set aside for trade, not for his own use.

He shoved the book to the bottom of his trunk, thinking it could stay there.

Sunniva and her children were well settled in their new house, but Sokka had convinced Zuko to hold off on any further construction for the time being and focus on spending the rest of the autumn building up their food stores for the winter. Since they didn't have the men for a hunting party, this meant the boys went fishing most days.

In the past, Katara would have gone fishing with her brother, but of course that was too dangerous now. Some of the other women fished as well, but Katara was left behind to take care of their children on those occasions.

The weeks passed. Their stores of salted fish, dried seaweed, and preserved salmonberries grew full as the daylight hours rapidly dwindled. And Katara found herself looking forward to the coming winter.

She usually did, because her birthday was in the winter. But this year she had another reason as well. During the months of darkness, most people seldom left the warmth and security of their own family dwellings. For Zuko and Iroh, presumably that meant they would stay aboard their ship, outside the village proper. Hopefully, Katara would be seeing a lot less of them. Maybe Gran Gran might even let her do some small waterbending, inside their tent.

The last day that the sun peaked above the horizon, everyone made a point to go outside and bid him farewell, until his return in the spring. The women sang songs of parting, bittersweet and full of longing for a happy reunion - some of them were the same songs they had sung when her father had left with the war party, Katara remembered with a sudden ache in her heart, and she briefly wondered what would happen if one day even the sun left them for good.

Zuko and Iroh joined them for the ceremony. As the women sang, they both held flames in their hands, and lifted them towards the fading glow in the sky.

Katara couldn't help but stare at the dancing fire, the ease with which Zuko manipulated his element, out in the open for all to see. The ache in her heart turned to bitter jealousy. It wasn't fair, she thought for the thousandth time, that he was here, and could do as he pleased, and she had to hide.

As the ceremony ended, the two firebenders extinguished their flames, and Zuko happened to glance in Katara's direction and catch her staring. Katara hastily looked away, her face

burning, but not before she noticed the unusual look on his face. Instead of glaring at her, Zuko had just looked tired, maybe even a little sad.

Of course he was sad to see the sun go, Katara told herself as she ducked back inside her family's tent. He'd never experienced a polar winter before. The spoiled jerk was in for a rude surprise.

She relished that thought.

Sunniva's labor pains began on the eve of the solstice.

Gran Gran went to the house to help her, and brought Katara along, hurrying through the trenches dug in the deep winter snows to spend as little time out in the darkness as possible. The wind howled and the green winter lights danced across the black sky above them, and Katara shivered, thinking of dark spirits, and hoping that Sokka and Zuko hadn't provoked anything by their visits to the old shipwreck.

But when they reached Sunniva's house, the interior was warm and cozy, and it was harder to believe that anything could go wrong. Katara was disappointed that Gran Gran wouldn't let her into the birthing room, and instead tasked her with keeping Sunniva's two older children entertained, but she made the best of it and sang songs and played games with the two little boys.

Eventually, the children grew tired and cranky, and though they whined for their mother, Katara managed to get them tucked into the sleeping bag they shared and nestled down by the firepit. Soon, they were asleep.

Just as Katara was beginning to wonder if there was anything else she could do to help, the door to the other room opened and Gran Gran called her name, low and urgent. Katara hurried over, catching a glimpse of the birthing room behind her grandmother - Sunniva was holding a swaddled bundle to her breast, but her face was haggard and betrayed none of the joy of a new mother. For a moment, Katara feared that the child was already dead.

“Listen carefully,” Gran Gran said, drawing Katara’s attention back to her. “I want you to go out, and run to the ship. Bring back Iroh or Zuko, whoever you meet first.”

“What for?” Katara asked indignantly. Men were almost never allowed to assist at a birth, much less foreigners. What could they do for a newborn that her grandmother, the oldest and wisest woman of the tribe, could not?

“The baby needs to be kept warm,” Gran Gran replied impatiently. “Now go.” She gave Katara a little push, and then closed the door.

In a daze, Katara pulled on her parka and mittens, and obeyed her grandmother’s instructions, seething all the way as she ran to the ship. That she should be sent begging to two firebenders to come help them was the ultimate indignity. She could only hope that it would be Iroh whom she met first.

But as she clambered up the gangplank to the ship’s deck, shouting for help, her hopes proved in vain. It was Zuko who opened the hatch and leaped out in alarm in response to her cries, without even his stupid cloak to protect him from the polar night.

“You’ve got to come quick,” Katara blurted out, grabbing his hand in spite of her own revulsion and dragging back down the gangplank. “Sunniva’s had her baby and Gran Gran needs you.” His hand, she noticed, was exceptionally warm, which only confirmed that her grandmother’s plan was a solid one.

“Needs me for what?” Zuko asked irritably, though he continued to follow her towards the house, even if he did pull his warm hand free of hers. Katara was actually grateful for that.

“For the baby,” Katara called over her shoulder, knowing that this still was not the best explanation but unable to find any other words. “Now hurry!”

She heard him mumble something else under his breath, but he didn’t turn back. Instead, he actually ran ahead of her - Katara mentally grumbled about his stupid long legs - and reached

the house first. By the time Katara got back inside and shut the door against the frigid night wind, Zuko was already seated by the firepit, and Gran Gran was arranging the swaddled bundle in his arms.

“Support his head,” Gran Gran instructed their baffled-looking chief. Katara didn’t think she’d ever seen his eyes so wide. “And keep him as warm as you can.”

Zuko nodded in understanding, but when Gran Gran withdrew, he spoke up in alarm. “Where are you going?”

“I need to tend to Sunniva,” Gran Gran explained patiently, crossing to the door to the other room. “Katara can help you.” And with that, she was gone.

Zuko looked back at Katara, clearly at a loss.

With an annoyed huff, Katara sat down next to him. She reached over and adjusted the edges of the blanket wrapped around the baby, though this wasn’t really necessary. She could feel the heat radiating off of Zuko’s body, keeping the child warm better than any blanket could. Even after running through the winter cold without a cloak, Zuko was still warm. The wonders of firebending, Katara thought bitterly.

The child himself had a thick tuft of dark hair, and round cheeks, which were good signs of health, though he looked a bit pale, and he was very still for a newborn. His breath seemed shallow, and Katara hadn’t heard him cry once. She wondered if something was wrong with his lungs.

“He’s so...tiny,” Zuko said unexpectedly.

Katara sat back and gave Zuko a skeptical look. “You have seen a baby before, haven’t you?” she asked, though judging by the way he was still staring at the child like it was some strange alien creature, she suspected she knew the answer to her question. Of course, a spoiled prince would never have had to babysit.

Zuko stiffened at her question, defensive. “I remember my sister when she was little,” he argued unconvincingly. Then, after a moment, he even admitted, “But not this little.”

It was the first Katara had ever heard him speak about his family, aside from his uncle and his father. She hadn’t even realized he had a sister. She wondered if Sokka knew.

“Well, of course they’re little when they’re born,” Katara said quickly, trying to brush away the unbidden thoughts of Zuko’s family - Did he miss them? Were they missing him, too? “It’d be hard to get them out otherwise.”

Zuko’s face turned bright red.

Boys, Katara thought, rolling her eyes. *So immature.*

They sat in awkward silence for a while longer. Katara checked on the two older children, who were still sleeping peacefully. When she returned to Zuko’s side by the fire, she saw that the new baby was beginning to fuss and move about in his arms. Zuko looked alarmed by this, but Katara knew it was a good sign. “He’s getting stronger,” she reassured him.

Then the baby began to cry. He still sounded weaker than he should, but the fact that he was making any sound at all was progress. “What do I…” Zuko began nervously.

But Gran Gran emerged from the other room before Katara could answer, and took the crying baby from Zuko. “It sounds like he’s ready to be fed,” she said, sounding pleased. She looked Zuko in the eye. “Thank you, Chief Zuko.” Then she took the baby to his mother.

Zuko said nothing, still seated. He turned back to the firepit, staring into the low flames. Whatever he had expected his job as chief to entail, Katara thought, cuddling a newborn baby probably hadn’t been part of it. But he had done it anyway, with far less complaint than Sokka would have.

Zuko had worked hard, Katara had to admit, in the months since he had come to the south pole. He had made sure this house got built in time for Sunniva to give birth, and he had helped fill out their winter stores, and now he had probably saved that baby's life. With his firebending, no less.

Katara's hands balled into fists in her lap. It was the Fire Nation that had brought so much death and destruction to their tribe, firebenders who had taken their own waterbenders away, and who had killed her mother. She hated them, every one, and Zuko more than almost any of them. But now, intermingled with that hatred, another feeling was beginning to assert itself. Begrudgingly, bitterly, she knew she felt just the smallest spark of gratitude, at least for the moment.

"Thank you," she said through gritted teeth, echoing Gran Gran's words. "For helping with the baby." It was less than she meant, but more than he deserved.

Zuko looked up at her, startled. "Of course," he said. She met his gold eyes, and for the first time she saw something there other than anger or resentment. It was small, but she thought she caught a glimpse of a bright flash of hope.

She hated that most of all.

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